

# Neurodiversity: The Chief Health Officer's Role in Realizing Business Opportunities and Fostering an Inclusive, Healthy and Psychologically Safe Work Environment



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In an increasingly challenging and competitive environment fuelled by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, employers are increasingly striving to attract, retain and develop a diverse future workforce with skills that will give them a competitive edge. Forward-thinking companies have recognized the importance of physical and mental health considerations and the benefits of guidance from a chief health officer (CHO) for a more productive, resilient and healthy global workforce. Among the most important skills identified by the World Economic Forum in its *Future of Jobs* report are analytical thinking and creative thinking.<sup>1</sup> These vital skills may be more prevalent in hitherto untapped talent pools such as neurodivergent individuals, for whom a holistic approach to health and well-being is essential.

Neurodiversity acknowledges that there are neurological differences and variations in cognitive style distributed within the human population. Neurodivergent individuals include people with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia and tic disorder or Tourette's syndrome. While neurodivergent individuals bring many different strengths to the world of work, their sense of inclusion remains low, and integrating their diverse talents continues to be a challenge in today's fast-paced workplace.<sup>2,3</sup> Yet, given the opportunity and with appropriate support, neurodiverse individuals are only too willing to apply critical skills such as attention to detail, hyperfocus and divergent thinking to help solve tomorrow's workplace challenges. This is where CHOs can be invaluable. With their specialist expertise in the workplace and health, together with a deep understanding of specific business contexts, they are ideally placed to advise on reasonable adjustments, access to specialist support and other critical adjustments needed to shape workplace policies and culture to be more inclusive for neurodivergent workers.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has become one of the most common and most widely discussed types of neurodiversity,<sup>4</sup> with online searches for ADHD increasing significantly between 2019 and 2023 according to a recent YouGov survey.<sup>5</sup> A parallel increase in employee requests for personal support has led many organizations to operate a defensive, gatekeeping medical model – offering workplace

personalization only to those who have a disclosed clinical diagnosis. The CHO can be an important ally for the employer while playing a vital role as an employee advocate when navigating the practicalities of clinical assessment and the requirements for developing policies and practice.

## What are the opportunities and barriers for organizations in developing a corporate culture that supports diversity and the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals?

Neuroinclusion increases engagement of the wider workforce; enlightened employers have recognized for some time that embracing diversity leads to more innovation and creativity. However, few employers have included neurodiversity within the scope of their diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) policies and practices. Fewer still are creating the psychological safe working environments needed to harness these diverse talents. Here again, the intervention of CHOs with a secure understanding of neuropsychology will inform and strengthen policies to ensure that diversity of thinking translates into inclusive and improved decision-making. They can also highlight the benefits of adopting a neuroinclusive culture for the holistic health and well-being of the wider workforce. Many workplace adaptations to support neurodiversity are free or low-cost and beneficial to neurodivergent and neurotypical alike. Many employers are unaware that a focus on neurodiversity also resonates with women, LGBTI communities and others seeking authentic approaches to DE&I at work. This strengthens teamwork and retention generally, as well as attracting talent.

Taking a neuroinclusive approach also reduces legal compliance risk, since many countries have regulations in place to protect employees with disabilities, which might bring some people with neurodivergent conditions into scope. The US Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and European equality regulations (i.e. Article 26 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Commission) both provide a legal framework to support employment integration and the inclusion of individuals with various forms of disabilities, which would encompass neurodivergence. These have determined in support of neurodivergent individuals, with particular regard to implementing

“reasonable accommodations” required by law and adjustments that facilitate optimum performance and productivity. Interventions, for example, might include a dual screen to improve concentration or use of noise-cancelling headphones to reduce sensory-processing distractions.

### What areas should employers focus on to support a more neurodiverse culture and promote holistic health and well-being at work?

**Leadership support at the highest level.** Up to 25% of chief executives believe themselves to be dyslexic according to John Chambers, Cisco’s former chief executive officer.<sup>6</sup> Yet very few have felt confident enough to publicly declare this. Self-aware leaders who choose to share their vulnerabilities and role-model inclusive behaviours immediately normalize neurodiversity for their own benefit and that of the organization. Their commitment to and championing of neurodiversity initiatives can be a key driver of cultural change and enable prioritization of the resources needed to support it.

**Neuroinclusive recruitment and talent management processes.** It is known that neurodivergent individuals experience much higher rates of unemployment than the general population. Once hired, career progression in many organizations depends on the demonstration of a wide range of general management skills. Working with the input of a clinical psychologist, talent management and job-design approaches can be focused on skills rather than traits, which adds to productivity and promotes career satisfaction and retention. This is particularly important when considering neurodivergent individuals who may have a blend of skills and who may benefit from specialist advice in the face of some challenges. Involving a health professional in recruitment and talent acquisition potentially makes selection processes more equitable while ensuring legal compliance.

**Creating a culture of psychological safety.** According to Amy Edmonson, Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, “Psychological safety describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual

respect in which people are comfortable being themselves” – in other words, it requires leaders to create a workplace culture where any team member can take interpersonal risks and speak up without fear of negative consequences.

Successfully integrating neurodivergent individuals in the workplace requires a shift in focus from diversity to inclusion. When employees feel that their manager genuinely cares about their well-being, and that their opinions are welcomed, key business outcomes such as retention and well-being improve.<sup>7</sup> In an environment in which psychological safety is perceived to be low, and challenges to the status quo are discouraged, neurodivergent individuals are unlikely to share new ideas. In a culture in which neurodivergent people feel free from stigma and can be themselves, they bring their innovative contributions to the fore. This also contributes greatly to the mental and emotional health of neurodivergent people.

Workplace environments do not always feel like safe places where neurodivergent individuals can express themselves. In a 2022 survey, career progression and psychological safety were identified as critical areas for attention for retention and well-being, more so than workplace adjustments alone.<sup>8</sup>

Building a culture of psychological safety is critical to overcoming a lifetime’s experience of stereotyping, unconscious bias and stigma. Here, the CHO can identify where specialist input may be beneficial for addressing specific challenges – for example, how to address the fact that many neurodivergent behaviours may be “invisible”, as individuals mask or conceal their true natures in an attempt to appear neurotypical and “fit in”. Not only is this stressful in itself but it also almost certainly inhibits their ability to demonstrate their true talents. Only by addressing these barriers can employers unlock neurodivergent employees’ novel contributions to innovation. The involvement of a health professional in the design and delivery of training programmes for managers is crucial for creating an environment of psychological safety at team level while ensuring legal compliance.

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“ **A culture of DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging) is a key driver of health and well-being in the workplace, as is the use of appropriate measurement tools. Most importantly, a systematic risk assessment of both physical and mental stress, accompanied by initiatives like manager and employee training on creating health-promoting work environments, is essential. This approach is globally implemented at DHL Group through the ‘DHL Certified’ programme.**

Andreas Tautz, Chief Medical Officer, DHL Group, Germany

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### Awareness training for leaders and managers

Although many managers are seen as supportive by their neurodivergent team members, few leaders feel knowledgeable enough to act with confidence or signpost pathways for support, according to researchers at Birbeck University (UK). In the absence of validated information to challenge existing biases about “hidden disabilities”, some managers harbour persistent beliefs that requested work adjustments such as flexible working or assistive technology are unwarranted or even unhelpful.<sup>9</sup>

Training on neurodiversity can be usefully integrated within existing training for managers in all aspects of holistic health and well-being at work (physical, mental, social and psychological health) and resonate consistently within DE&I programmes. There is good evidence that in-house training integrated with lived experience can change attitudes. However, to change behaviours at work, the involvement of external professionals makes a real difference, with research showing that training using external professionals is more likely to lead to changes in workers’ behaviour. Therefore, a blended approach is recommended.<sup>10</sup>

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“ **Unilever provides an environment in which everyone’s unique strengths and perspectives, including those of our neurodivergent colleagues, can contribute to innovation and growth and enrich the culture of the company.**

Diana Han, Chief Health and Wellbeing Officer, Unilever

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### Improving the working environment

For most people at work, having a conversation with their manager about everyday workplace hygiene factors – such as ambient noise, lighting or access to the relevant software and technologies needed to improve productivity – is routine. When managers seek to understand and address these factors, morale and productivity both increase. Neurodivergent individuals, on the other hand, often feel that their similar needs are either misunderstood or ignored.

There is good evidence that when simple workplace adjustments are tailored to the individual needs of neurodivergent employees, this makes a significant difference to their retention. In a recent UK study, almost three times as many employees who had tailored adjustments expressed a desire to stay with their employer, compared with those who did not have tailored adjustments.<sup>11</sup> Examples of such adjustments to help neurodivergent individuals thrive at work include flexible work arrangements, sensory-friendly environments, assistive technologies and clear communication protocols.

Neurodivergent individuals may encounter specific practical, physical, psychological and emotional challenges, such as the effects of their medication, a heightened sensitivity to noise or external distractions. Here advocacy by an occupational health professional and facilitated access to

specialist assessment and/or support can be extremely helpful. Occupational health professionals are specialists who address biopsychosocial challenges and organizational contexts to guide organizations and workers towards better health and productivity choices and outcomes. Guidance from a medical professional on the validation of a diagnosis where needed in employment settings and the identification of actions needed to meet the twin goals of legal compliance and workforce productivity can be invaluable.

### Clear pathways for support and advice (for managers and employees)

Significant confusion remains among managers and staff about where to obtain the best advice regarding neurodiversity. While much good advice exists and is endorsed by professional bodies, it is not always well signposted, so there is a role for the CHO to guide human resources (HR) professionals towards streamlined, consistent and verified sources of information. By engaging directly with people who have lived experience of neurodiversity, CHOs can ensure that the organization’s language and context are neuroaffirming. Employee resource groups (ERGs) can be invaluable for improving communications, dispelling myths and driving positive change. ERGs also provide a forum in which neurodivergent employees can share their personal experiences, access support and highlight areas for improvement.

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“ **At Compass, our success is built on the creativity and talent of our workforce, day in and day out. We understand that talent comes in many forms, and we make it a priority to train our people to embrace diversity in all its aspects – especially diversity of thought. People with autism offer unique strengths and fresh perspectives, and through our partnership with Ambitious About Autism in the UK, we’ve successfully brought talented individuals into roles that suit their skills. This experience has been invaluable, reinforcing the importance of focusing on what people can achieve rather than what they can’t.**

Deborah Lee, Group Chief People Officer, Compass Group

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## Calls for action

The ability to harness scarce skills in the digital age will be a key determinant of success and sustainability for tomorrow's leading organizations. Those that embrace a culture of diversity, inclusion and equity with neurodiversity as an integral component will outperform their competitors. Their positive actions will not only enhance the working lives, careers and well-being of neurodivergent individuals but also increase engagement across the organization. Key actions for change to drive the needed shifts in culture include:

### Executive leadership

- Champion neurodiversity and psychological safety as key drivers of business improvement
- Share authentic and personal experiences
- Role-model inclusive behaviours to normalize neurodiversity within the organization and inspire others to follow suit
- Foster a neuroinclusive culture

### People and culture leaders (chief people officers and their teams)

- Review and improve recruitment and selection, career development and talent management processes to ensure they are neuroaffirmative and neuroinclusive
- Implement regular training programmes (for all employees) covering the spectrum of neurodivergent conditions – dispel myths and highlight the strengths and unique contributions of neurodivergent individuals
- Ensure neurodiversity considerations are integrated within DE&I agendas
- Create and distribute materials that provide information on neurodiversity, including best practices for communication, collaboration and accommodation
- Encourage employee resource groups

### Chief health officers (CHOs and their teams)

- Advocate with executive leadership to improve the organization's culture, reduce stigma and foster understanding
  - Review sources of support (including access, verification and signposting)
  - Improve neuroinclusive content of policies and training programmes
  - Integrate neuroscience-based advice into HR policies
  - Ensure that workplace accommodations are tailored to the individual needs of neurodivergent employees
  - Facilitate personalized and pragmatic solutions that promote harmony in teams
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